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ABSTRACT

To develop and test a theoretical model, based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975), for understanding and predicting the decision to stay in or drop out of school, to identify the specific beliefs that are the basis of that decision, and to evaluate the use of moderator variables (sex, race) to individualize the model, 1,732 tenth grade students completed a questionnaire. The students represented 10 high schools from five school districts. The questionnaire was developed as the result of 250 interviews with high school students. An analysis of the data from 712 subjects (356 persisters, 356 potential dropouts) showed the feasibility of applying the Theory of Reasoned Action to the dropout problem. Social influences and attitudes were found to be the two immediate determinants of a student's intentions. Students' decisions were determined more by their own attitudes toward dropping out or staying in school than by their perceptions of what other people wanted them to do. These attitudes were based on the students' beliefs about the consequences of their behavior. Generally, the student who was likely to stay in school perceived immediate social benefits and societal rewards for his actions, while the potential dropout had negative feelings about unavoidable school experiences and was less likely to perceive any good reasons for staying in school. The use of moderator variables (sex, race) improved the validity and usefulness of the model. The findings suggest that effective intervention programs must seek to change beliefs in order to change behaviors. (BL)

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Dropping Out of High School:

An Application of the Theory of Reasoned Action

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In the last fifteen years, our nation has lost sight of the problems of students dropping out of our educational system. By current estimates, about one-fourth of our young people will not graduate from high school (Plisko, 1983). The State of Louisiana typifies this problem; over 36,000 Louisiana students have left school in the last two years. In spite of the obvious social and economic consequences we still do not understand why these students decide to drop out.

The results of existing research suggest the obvious; dropping out is a complex behavior and the reasons for this behavior are equally complex. Socioeconomic status, being held back, absences, parents' level of education, poor grades, academic ability and eighty other variables are cited as "causes" for dropout behavior (Howard & Anderson, 1978). Unfortunately, this research has not led to unified comprehensive theory that satisfactorily predicts, explains, and identifies the dropout.

Perhaps an alternative approach - one that recognizes the decision process that leads to dropping out - would be more successful. Such a theoretical approach which could identify the immediate psychological determinants of the students' decision is represented in the work of Fishbein and Ajzen (1975). This theory - the Theory of Reasoned Action - has already been applied with remarkable success to a variety of equally complex behavioral domains including smoking, abortion, birth control, voting, as well as, a similar retention problem in the military (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Hom & Hulin, 1981).

The purpose of our project, then, is to provide a theoretical framework for understanding and predicting the decision to either stay in school or to drop out. This presentation will only discuss the first step in this on-going longitudinal project. Specifically, I will discuss a study which attempted to:

1) develop and test a model of this decision process based on the Theory of Reasoned Action
2) identify the specific beliefs which are the basis of this decision
3) evalute the use of moderator variables to individualize the model and improve prediction

METHOD

We began the project by interviewing 250 students. These eliciation interviews resulted in a list of 29 salient beliefs related to the consequences of either staying in school or dropping out and a list of 16 referents likely to influence the students' decision.

QUESTIONNAIRE The results of this pilot study provided the basis for developing the questionnaire. This questionnaire contained items measuring all of the theoretical components by means of seven-point bi-polar scales. Additional questions were used to obtain demographic information, e.g. age, sex, race, socio-economic status, parent's education etc., for each student.

The students' behavioral beliefs were assessed by asking them to indicate the likelihood that a behavior, e.g. dropping out, would result in a specific consequence, e.g. getting a job. One set of questions assessed their beliefs about the consequences of dropping out and another set assessed their beliefs about staying in school. For each such belief, there was a corresponding item measuring the students' evaluation of the consequence or outcome. Attitude toward the behaviors was also measured with two items: attitude toward dropping out and attitude toward staying in school.

Similarly the students' overall perception of social pressure (i.e. subjective norm) was obtained with two items - one related to the normative pressure to stay in school and one related to dropping out of school. The student's perception of whether or not specific referents think he/she should drop out

i.e. normative beliefs, were assessed for 16 different referents. Additional items measured the students' motivation to comply with the wishes of each of these referents.

Since the focus of this study was the students' intentions, behavioral intentions were measured with two separate items. One item asked the students to indicate the likelihood of dropping out of school and the second item asked for the likelihood of staying in school until graduation. The major dependent variable in this study, then, was the difference between the students' intention to stay and their intention to drop out.

Although not reported in this presentation, the student's status (whether or not the student has dropped out) is being monitored to determine the predictive validity of the model.

SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE. A representative sample of ten high schools was selected from five geographically dispersed school districts. These schools were located in rural and urban areas and ranged in size from less than 100 students to over 3,000 students. At each school the questionnaires were distributed to all of the tenth grade students during their scheduled English period. In each class, a researcher explained the purpose of the study, assured them of the anonymity of their responses, and provided detailed instructions on the use of the scales. To ensure comprehension and cooperation, the researcher read each item aloud while the students marked their responses in their own questionnaire.

Of the 1,732 students who completed the questionnaires 356 students indicated some likelihood of dropping out of school. Each of these students was matched with another student (a persister) who indicated that dropping out was extremely unlikely but who was of the same age, sex, race, and enrolled in the same English section.

The data from these 712 students was analyzed with a variety of multivariate techniques. Multiple regression analysis, path analysis, and correlational matrices were used to develop and test the model. These analyses were then repeated using the sex and race of the students as moderator variables.

To identify the specific beliefs underlying their decision, forty-five students who indicated that it was quite or extremely likely that they would drop out of school were labelled potential dropouts and the matching students were labelled persisters. For all of the belief and the consequence items, the means of these two groups (N=90) were compared using MANOVA procedures followed by univariates ANOVAs.

Because of the large sample size, a very conservative criteria for significance was employed. Thus, all of the reported results are significant at the .001 level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Determinants of Intention. According to the theory, a student's intention should be a function of two determinants: attitude toward the behavior, and the social influence related to that behavior. In this study, the first determinant was differential attitude, i.e., the difference between the students' evaluation of staying and evaluation of dropping out. The social influence component was also a differential, i.e., the difference between the student's subjective norm for staying in school and of dropping out.

The results indicated that, both the attitude and the normative component are related to the student's intention. Together they provided a fairly accurate ($R = .60$) prediction of the student's intention. In terms of the relative importance of these components, attitude was weighted more heavily than the subjective norm: the beta weights were .60 and .32 respectively. In other words, a student's intention to stay in or leave school was determined more by his/her

own attitudes toward those behaviors than by his/her perceptions of what other people think he/she should do.

Although the subjective norm and attitude toward the behavior are the immediate determinants of intention, they are not the primary elements in the decision process. To understand the student's intention we need to identify the beliefs which underlie the attitudes and the perceived social norms. Identifying these beliefs--both the behavioral and the normative beliefs--was the second goal of this study.

Determinants of Subjective Norm. As an overall indicant of social pressure, the subjective norm is based on a student's beliefs about what specific important referents want him to do and the student's motivation to comply with these referents. Thus, for each student, the product of the normative belief and the corresponding motivation to comply were summed across all referents. The sum was a moderately effective predictor, $r = .42$, of the differential subjective norm.

The univariate analysis provided specific information on the strength of the social influence for each referent. In general, the nature of the relationship is consistent across all of the referents: The stronger the beliefs that these referents do not want the student to drop out, the greater the perceived social pressure to stay in school, and the less likely it is that the student intends to drop out. However, the strength of this social influence does vary from referent to referent. Not surprisingly, the student's mother, father, and grandparents were the most influential. Slightly less important predictors were beliefs about the wishes of aunts, uncles, boyfriends or girlfriends, and important teachers. Interestingly, the students intentions were virtually unaffected by peers in school, their employer, and peers who had already dropped out of school.

Determinants of Attitude toward Behavior. According to the theory, a person's beliefs about the consequences of any action and his evaluation of those

consequences underlie his attitude toward that behavior. Specifically, the likelihood that a behavior will result in a specific consequence is multiplied by the evaluation of that consequence. Then, the sum of these products across all outcomes is considered to be the determinant of the attitude toward that behavior. However, for this model, there were two such sets of beliefs: the sum of the beliefs about dropping out, and the sum of the beliefs about staying in school. Therefore, the difference between these sums was used as a predictor of the differential attitude. This measure of differential beliefs was found to be highly related to both the student's attitude, $r = .70$, and their intention, $r = .47$.

Subsequent correlational analyses identified seventeen behavioral beliefs which were significally ($p's < .0001$) related to both attitudes and intentions. In addition, the univariate ANOVAs indicated a significant difference ($p's < .001$) between persisters and potential dropouts for each of these beliefs. These beliefs appear to fall into three distinct categories. The first category consists of beliefs about the consequences the result from staying in school and graduating. The second category includes beliefs about the consequences of dropping out of school, and the third, beliefs about the school experience itself.

The first category included a set of beliefs and evaluation of consequences that pertained to outcomes which could follow from staying in school and receiving a high school diploma. These five beliefs pertained to the likelihood that staying in school would lead to the following consequences: (1) going to college, (2) being educated, (3) attaining a planned career or occupation, (4) having feelings of pride and accomplishment, and (5) being a success in life. The stronger the student's belief that staying in school will result in these consequences and the more positive the evaluation of these consequences, the more positive his attitude toward staying in school.

Moreover, each of these beliefs significantly discriminated between students likely to drop out and those likely to stay in school. Thus, compared to the potential dropout, the persister is more likely to believe that staying in school will lead to these outcomes and/or evaluates these outcomes more positively. Apparently, the potential dropout is less likely to believe that societal rewards such as being educated, going to college, being a success, etc., will result from staying in high school.

The second category of beliefs involved consequences that could result if a student drops out of school. Two of these outcomes could be considered to be attractive alternatives to staying in school: getting a G.E.D., and getting a job. Three other consequences represented situations that students evaluate negatively and generally avoid: being bored and having nothing to do, being in trouble with the law, and being in trouble with the family. The most important determinant in this category was the student's belief about and evaluation of the G.E.D. Compared to the persister, the potential dropout evaluated the G.E.D. more positively and was more likely to believe that he would get a G.E.D. if he dropped out. Similarly, the potential dropout was more confident that he would get a job if he dropped out and felt more positive about such a job than did the persister.

For the negative consequences of dropping out, the relationship was exactly opposite. Beliefs that dropping out would result in being bored and getting into trouble with the law or the family were held more strongly by persisters. In summary, then, the potential dropout was less likely to believe that dropping out will lead to negative consequences but was more likely to believe that there were two "good reasons" to drop out, i.e., get a G.E.D. and get a good job.

The third category consisted of beliefs about and evaluations of the student's school experience, i.e., the consequences or outcomes related to school attendance. The set of beliefs that were strong predictors in this category related to the following consequence: participation in school activities and athletics, meeting people and making new friends, spending time at school, following school rules and regulations, and doing schoolwork, homework, and studying. Several other belief/consequence combinations were noteworthy because they were not related to the student's attitudes or intentions. School-related experiences which were not relevant to the decision process included having poor teachers, being bored in class, failing courses, having fights or hassles with other students, and having the opportunity to be with friends.

The results indicated that the persister is more likely than the potential dropout to believe that he will participate in extracurricular activities and will make new friends, and to evaluate these consequences positively. For the remaining predictors, the evaluation of school experience rather than the strength of the belief was the determining element. In general, school-related experience was evaluated more negatively by those students likely to drop out.

These results suggest that the student who is likely to stay in school perceives some immediate benefits, mostly social, from attending school. Together with the societal rewards which result from graduation, these beliefs constitute "good reasons" to stay in school. In contrast, the potential dropout possesses more negative feelings about some unavoidable school experiences, i.e.g rules and regulations, homework, studying, teachers, etc. and is less likely to perceive any "good reasons" to stay in school.

Variations of the Model. The model as described above was developed on the entire sample of 712 students. However, another goal of this study was to

determine if the utility and accuracy of this decision model could be improved by employing characteristics of the students as moderator variables.

Analyses using sex and race as moderators did, in fact, result in slightly different models for different groups or subsets of the sample. The following discussion will briefly outline some of the variations in the model.

First, the model developed to predict the intentions of male students was slightly different from the model for female students. Although both models are equally effective (R = .61 for males and .59 for females), they differed in terms of the relative importance of the determinants of intention. For male students, the attitude measure (B = .66) was more important predictor of intention than was subjective norm (B = .23). However, for female students, the normative component (B = .52) was slightly more important than the attitude component (B = .47). The student's perception of social influence or normative pressure, then, is more likely to influence the decision of female students than male students.

Although the majority of beliefs which were determinants in the overall model were also determinants for both females and males, there were some beliefs which appeared in only one of the models. The beliefs that were predictors for females, but not males, pertained to the following consequences: being with my friends, being bored in my classes, having to follow school rules and regulations and relations with teachers. On the other hand, the belief that staying in school will result in fights and hassles with other students and the belief that dropping out of school will result in being treated like an adult were relevant only for the decisions of male students.

A similar set of analyses was conducted using race as a moderator variable. The resulting models for white and for black students were similar, but the model for white student (R = .65) was somewhat more effective than the model for black students (R = .54).

The analyses of beliefs also produced variations in the models based on the race of the student: some beliefs were predictors only for blacks, while others applied only to whites. Beliefs related to getting into trouble with the law, getting into trouble with the family, and getting into hassles or fights, and their relations with teachers were relevant only to the decisions of black students. In contrast, those beliefs which affected only white students were related to: being a success in life, being treated like an adult, being with friends, being bored in class, and following school rules and regulations. Of course, the other beliefs which appeared in the overall model were also predictors in the separate models for white and black students.

A decision model was also developed for students who indicated a racial/ethnic identity other than black or white. This group consisted almost entirely of Vietnamese students. This model had two noteworthy characteristics. First, this model was the most effective of the three models ($R = .85$). Second, the normative influence appeared to be more important than the attitudinal component.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study demonstrated the feasibility of applying the Theory of Reasoned Action to the dropout problem. The use of this theory did, in fact, result in a fairly effective model for understanding a student's decision either to stay in school or drop out. Consistent with the theory, social (or normative) influences and attitudes were found to be the two immediate determinants of the student's intention. The results also indicated that the students' decisions are determined more by their own attitudes toward dropping out or staying in school than by their perception of what other people (e.g., parents, peers, teachers, etc.) want them to do.

However, these attitudes are based on the student's beliefs about the

consequences which will result from dropping out or staying in school. Identifying these underlying beliefs are critical for understanding the student's decision and for designing effective intervention programs. Thus, an important outcome of this study was the identification of specific beliefs which distinguish between the students likely to drop out and those who will stay in school. To improve student retention, these beliefs must be changed!

Another important outcome was the demonstration that the validity and usefulness of this theoretical approach can be improved by using moderator variables. By developing variations in the model for subsamples of students, it was found that the relative importance of social pressure and the effect of specific beliefs depended upon the sex and/or race of the student.

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